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ABSTRACT

A teacher training course must serve as a model of turning theory into practice--a student-centered, collaborative effort involving active learners taking charge of their own learning--and that includes the teacher as well as the students. Only by active reading, writing, listening, and talking about these ideas--as opposed to merely being told to do them in their own classrooms--can teachers in training make them their own. Without such ownership, it cannot be expected that anyone will create an interactive, transactional classroom. Two students responded to this teaching with "does this stuff really work?" and "yeahbut." Four years later, when one student was asked if she had found that "this stuff really does work," she confirmed that it did. A second student wrote a comprehensive course plan, clearly containing global revisions of past practice and including the new philosophical approach to teaching, and later reported twice on the success of her new approach to teaching. The attempt to discover whether voices of cognitive dissonance within classrooms abet rather than sabotage what theory and research tell about how people learn showed an educator that: collaborative, transactional learning practices elicit a fuller range of voices; these diverse voices lead to negotiation of socially constructed interpretations of texts, theory, and practice; such negotiations promote a sense of engagement with and ownership of texts, theory, and practice; and informed practices amplify all classroom voices. (CR)

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COGNITIVE DISSONANCE IN THE ENGLISH EDUCATION CLASSROOM

Diana Y. Dreyer

When my brother Mike and I were kids, we were pros at countering parental dictates or opinions with "yeahbuts." Mom or Dad would lay forth some logical claim or explanation as to why we should or shouldn't do something, and we'd respond with a "Yeah, but all the other kids are going," or "Yeah, but you let Mike bike past 103rd Street," or "Yeah, but I can finish my homework after I listen to *The Green Hornet*." We must've driven our long-suffering folks crazy sometimes with the "yeahbut" tactic, a realization that finally hit home once I had children of my own who practiced their own versions of the "yeahbut" theme. I really don't recall my parents' ever resorting to "Because I told you so; that's why," though I confess to turning to that exasperated response on occasion myself as a mom.

It's one thing, of course, for a parent to pull such a power play occasionally. It's quite another for a classroom teacher to turn to such a tactic, especially, perhaps, in a teacher education course designed to promote the notions that learning is transactional and that knowledge is socially constructed. Such stances mean little if teachers merely tell their teachers in training that's how we come to learn and know. Rather the teacher-training course itself must serve as a model of turning theory into practice—a student-centered, collaborative effort involving active learners taking charge of their own learning—and that includes the teacher as well as the students. Only by active reading, writing, listening, and talking about these ideas—as opposed to merely being told to do them in their own classrooms—can teachers in training make them their own. Without such ownership, we can't expect anyone to create an interactive, transactional classroom.

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That said, I want to tell you about two former students to whom I desperately wanted to retort, "Because I told you so," on more than one occasion throughout two different semesters studded with more "yeahbuts" than I care to think about. I expect some of these contradictions, of course, all too acutely aware of my own skepticism throughout my own paradigm-shifting struggles. These two, however, remained more obviously doubting Thomasinas than most of my other students, and—furthermore—made no attempts to pose their nagging questions in teacher-pleasing ways.

Kim took up residence in an undergraduate, upper-division course I regularly teach, Practicum: The Teaching of Writing, in January of 1992. Throughout that semester she dutifully and generally actively participated in class and faithfully maintained her learning log reflecting on course activities, readings, and projects. Just as faithfully, she peppered that log with plaintive "yeahbuts," generally followed with the question, "Does this stuff really work?" Unfortunately, she's not the packrat that I am and can't retrieve those entries. I, on the other hand, readily located her theoretically anonymous midterm reactionnaire, a survey I regularly distribute to all my classes, requesting if possible that responders alter their handwriting to ensure both anonymity and honesty. On that document, Kim described herself as quite active, participating frequently in class. She wrote the following reaction to the class thus far:

> I've found this class has been a challenging one. Every class meeting my wrought-in-stone ideas are challenged and I must take a good look at my teaching/writing philosophies and possibly change them. I needed to have some concrete instruction in the teaching of writing, rather than theory that I can't apply. This class has [provided] that.

She continued that the class might be improved, observing that "the structure of the class is such that the only way to improve it would be on a personal, individual level," a cryptic comment I've never fully comprehended. Finally in response to the question "What is on your mind that you wish you could say in class or to the instructor privately?" she omitted the "yeahbut" but ended, "Does this stuff really work?"

Come May, she and I parted company, both of us undoubtedly relieved not to have to face each other with any more troubling beliefs or questions. Imagine my surprise upon encountering her four years later at the local grocery store, where to my even greater astonishment she announced she had recently participated in an area National Writing Project and furthermore was now under contract at the local high school. I couldn't resist asking her if "this stuff really does work" and was delighted with her affirmative and affirming response. Of course I know I can't credit my own classroom for enabling Kim to take ownership of the theories and their application that I attempted to foster. But I think some seeds were sown there which Kim nurtured herself by the enlightened professional choices she made subsequently. She's grown from an unexperienced and self-described "uncommitted" college senior into a classroom pro, informed and confident, still sometimes posing "yeahbut" as we all do—and rightfully so—but now knowing where and how to go about finding answers to perplexing pedagogical problems.

Three years after my initial encounter with Kim, along came Jill, a both experienced and committed teacher who enrolled in a graduate course I taught in the spring of 1995, The Teaching of Writing and Literature. Jill is one of those amazing adjuncts who sometimes teaches as many as eight different classes in one semester,

traveling to up to three different colleges to do so. She didn't (and doesn't) have time or patience to deal with anything less than absolute efficiency, prompting her reliance on teacher-centered, lecture courses, providing the following rationale in an early log entry:

> My biggest bone of contention with whole language is that it just isn't very efficient, time wise. Sure, if you have 50 minutes a day, everyday, and 180 of them, you have ample time to "explore" and "create student-organized curricula," but I don't have that kind of time.... It's hard enough to do that wicked but necessary thing called "covering the material' if all I do is lecture. If I get creative, much of the content falls by the wayside. Is that reasonable?

She elaborated on a number of work constraints peculiar to her particular adjunct positions, concluding that while alternative ideas may well work in some situations, "What's the point of buying into a philosophy that is impossible to implement in my own [teaching situation—especially in a literature survey course]? I swallowed my urge to resort to "Because I said so," knowing how futile such a response would be, especially to a mature student, but also clinging to the memory of a comment Jill had written the week before about a high school course she'd had: "We learned to be quiet and take good notes, but I'm not sure we learned much that was memorable about American literature." In that same initial in-class freewrite, she'd contrasted that class with one in writing taken later, wherein she says:

> "I was both a writer and a reader.... We learned both to critique others' works constructively and to make our own works reader proof to the best of our abilities. The teacher's role was just to guide the discussions and to offer her own suggestions. Since she also wrote pieces for each class meeting, her work was

fair game too, and we eventually were even able to give *her* suggestions, which really boosted our self esteem and confidence as writers and critiquers.

As long as Jill could articulate with such clarity her own student experience, I was reasonably confident she'd soon see the wisdom of relinquishing her transmissional, lecture mode, its appealing "efficiency" aside, for a more authentic means of engaging her students in texts and ideas. I was wrong.

Each successive entry contained another "yeahbut," focusing on an array of concerns, all legitimate. What about grading—in the class we all shared and those for which she toted the grade book? How much authority can legitimately be handed over to students? Just what is the teacher's responsibility for moving minority speakers toward the so-called "standard" English?

Yet I began to notice indications that Jill was building upon that previously-described positive writing workshop she'd experienced as a student, searching for ways she could incorporate some of the theory and practice we'd discussed in class into her own classes. Indeed, five weeks into the semester she wrote, "I think I've already been using many whole-language-type techniques in my classes, without even knowing it. Now that I understand what I am doing, I have hopes of actually being able to turn my course into a whole-language reading workshop, with only a few reservations."

In another entry she reflected more specifically about how to implement such changes, realizing as she wrote that she didn't have "to make Shakespeare a one-week event." After pondering alternatives to existing practice, she wrote, "Wow—this could be interesting! I've always before taught each genre—short fiction, poetry, drama—as a

separate unit, which necessitated spending only one week on *Hamlet* or *Lear*, which I always found distressing. And to think I won't even have to change texts!"

Such optimism seemed relatively short-lived, however, as a couple of weeks later Jill reverted to earlier grumpiness and "yeahbut" rerservations. The whole language approach in our class she labeled dithering; why didn't I just tell them what to do—again in the interests of time effectiveness. One of the course textbooks provided reasonable ideas yet ones too sophomoric for the students she taught. Even an area conference she'd recently attended contained "extremely boring" presentations. Almost overlooked in that gloomy entry, however, lay the following little nugget: "One panel [at the conference] had the listeners brainstorm ideas, then divide into groups and discuss our 'reading autobiographies,' then opened the discussion to the entire audience—just like class. This, I thought, was the most worthwhile of all the presentations we attended." At this point, I almost begin to believe (or at least hope) that Jill was beginning to "yeahbut" herself—and, of course, better she than me.

And that's the way the remainder of that semester progressed for Jill and me. She'd sit in class contributing to whatever we happened to be doing each week but often with body language conveying what she herself terms grudging acquiescence. On at least one occasion, however, she described a small group in-class activity conducted the previous week, explaining how well her group worked, their happiness with their end product, and her enjoyment of the process itself. But before every Monday evening meeting, I pondered what new "yeahbuts" she'd toss out next. When I anticipated the worst, she'd allow that just maybe this stuff does work. She'd lull me into complacency and then "yeahbut" me again.

Little wonder I looked forward to the end of that semester and the reality of bidding adieu to this gadfly. Imagine my surprise again, however, when I began reading her final assignment after classes officially concluded. She had taken on the task of reformulating one of her introduction to literature courses into a reading/writing workshop. Her introduction to her new course plans reads as follows:

> In registering for this course, I imagined it would provide me with some new techniques and tricks to use in my classroom, and it did. But I was not prepared to be dumped into a whole new philosophical approach to teaching.... Already on the first day of class, I was hostile. I had been teaching for twelve years, and I really didn't want to hear any more philosophical arguments on what *should* happen in my classroom, when none of those theories ever seemed to account for the real world constraints teachers have to live with.... I knew my students learned from me, if lectures didn't work for other teachers, then they were obviously doing it wrong. Why should I have to change?...But there I was, taking the course, and unless I dropped it (which I considered), I was going to have to live with the material whether I liked it or not. I stayed. And I bit my tongue [not always, I hasten to interject] and tried to control my scowls and read the books like a good little hostile student. And gradually, perhaps in my sleep, I was converted....

What followed was a comprehensive course plan, one clearly containing global revisions of past practice and including readings, a plethora of relevant activities and projects, assessment strategies, etc., concluding with Jill's assurance that she was excited about this new plan of hers and "looking forward to trying it out."

Here I interjected my own mental "yeahbut," perhaps infected with its prevalence by now. "Yeah, you say that now," I muttered to myself. "But what are the odds of your actually putting your money where your mouth is?" I can be grumpy too. But I was also wrong again.

The next semester an unsolicited letter from Jill arrived, updating me on her revised course's progress, including her encounter with the same kinds of "yeahbuts" she'd originally expressed. Her students commented:

1. Why don't you just tell us what you want?
2. I don't have time to do a project, let alone think one up.
3. What is the point of having us contract for our own grades? Everybody wants and A.
4. Why can't we just take tests and write papers, like usual?

Jill forged ahead though, sure she'd find a way to cope, ending the letter with, "Anyway, I wanted to thank you for forcing—er, suggesting that I do this. I think my course and my students will be better for it, and it will probably be more fun for me too. Maybe my theoretical stance really *has* shifted. . . ?" At that point her experimental class was only slightly underway, however, so while I took some satisfaction regarding her shifting paradigm, I did a bit more "yeahbutting" of my own again. "Wait 'til those folks wear you down once that new semester energy wanes," I ruminated; "Then tell me how much fun you're having."

But Jill surprised me once again, writing another update the following spring: "The course went very well, projects and all, and aside from a few concerted difficulties on my part regarding how to evaluate such things, I think everything went better than I expected." Furthermore, she continued, "I also worked some whole language practices

into several of my other courses""-including Logic, Introduction to Philosophy, and Introduction to Moral Reasoning. She ended this letter with gratitude too:

> I want to thank you for insisting that we all—and perhaps I in particular, having been so negative about it—take the whole language philosophy seriously. I know [a classmate] never believed I was really a "convert" as I expressed in my final project, but I think I am—more so now than when I wrote the paper for you.

So what do all these "yeahbuts" tell us—Kim's, Jill's, and my own? I've sifted through artifacts generated by Kim's Practicum and Jill's graduate class—syllabi, lesson plans, handouts, their writing, etc. I wanted to discover if voices of cognitive dissonance within such classrooms abet rather than sabotage what theory and research tell us about how people learn. This is what I think I learned:

1. That collaborative, transactional learning practices elicit a fuller range of voices;
2. That these diverse voices lead to negotiation of socially-constructed interpretations of texts, theory, and practice—both emerging and previously established;
3. That such negotiations promote a sense of engagement with and ownership of texts, theory, and practice;
4. That informed practices amplify all classroom voices, harmony ultimately emerging from cacophony.